Introduction

In the context of Irish cultural studies the career of Michele Esposito is of no small interest, as he is a figure of seminal importance in the history of Irish music. Born in 1855, Esposito studied piano and composition at the Naples Conservatory, where he was a close contemporary of Giuseppe Martucci. Like Martucci, his remarkable musical gifts were apparent at an early age and by his early twenties he had earned a notable reputation as a pianist and conductor. He also made his mark as a composer, aligning himself with the progressive coterie of Italian musicians who, under Liszt's influence, chose to cultivate instrumental music based on Austro-German models rather than opera. In 1878, finding that Naples offered limited scope for his talent, Esposito moved to Paris on the advice of Anton Rubinstein, hoping to forge a reputation there. His public appearances as a pianist were well received, but the lucky break which might have launched him on an international career somehow eluded him. After four years of eking out a precarious living, he accepted a teaching post at a private music school in Dublin, the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), in order to provide adequately for his own family. Paris's loss was Dublin's gain: in the event, Esposito remained in the Irish capital for forty-six years, quickly establishing himself as a leading figure in the country's musical life.

For complex reasons bound up with Ireland's colonial past, musical culture in Ireland had remained rather undeveloped in comparison with other European countries. Dublin had no symphony orchestra, opera house or ballet company. Concert life was fairly restricted and educational opportunities, particularly for advanced students, were almost entirely lacking. With remarkable energy and determination, Esposito promptly set about transforming these circumstances and greatly enriched Irish musical culture in the process. At the RIAM, he proved himself to be a dedicated and exacting teacher of piano, setting new standards of artistic accomplishment and technical excellence. He was tirelessly active as a performer, appearing in recital with some of the most eminent

instrumentalists of the period. His appearances as a solo recitalist and in programmes of chamber music were a constant fixture in the city's calendars of musical events, and over several decades he introduced an enormous repertoire of unfamiliar works to Dublin audiences. He went on to found Ireland's first professional symphony orchestra, the Dublin Orchestral Society, which was run on a cooperative basis and presented annual seasons of concerts between 1899 and 1914. In later life, his scholarly interests came increasingly to the fore: Esposito became a prolific editor, producing a pioneering anthology of early Italian keyboard works, an edition of the Beethoven piano sonatas and a great deal else besides.

He also continued to compose to the extent that his heavy professional schedule allowed. His output is not very voluminous, but it includes orchestral music, substantial chamber works, two operas, songs and much music for the piano. This corpus of work is uneven, but at its best, Esposito's music is imaginative and skilfully wrought. In his lifetime, his compositions attracted distinguished advocates of the calibre of Hamilton Harty and Vittorio Gui, which testifies to the high regard in which they were held. Some of the chamber and orchestral works — particularly the *Neapolitan Suite*, the violin and cello sonatas, the string quartets — are of notable distinction and would amply reward the attention of enterprising performers. For the most part, they are couched in the idioms of late Romanticism, although some of Esposito's later music reflects modernist influences such as that of Debussy. Listeners familiar with late nineteenth-century Italian instrumental music will immediately recognize its kinship to the music of Sgambati, Martucci and other figures. From an Irish perspective, a few of Esposito's scores are of particular interest: his *Irish Symphony* and the *Irish Suite* are notable early attempts to use Irish folk tunes as a basis for serious symphonic works; while his operas and the cantata *Deirdre* engage with a new kind of subject matter, principally drawing on Gaelic mythology and folklore as well as contemporary rural life, which came to be favoured by many Irish writers during the Literary Revival. These works are amongst the most interesting attempts by composers at the period to forge a distinctively 'Irish' mode of musical utterance.

As will be apparent from the foregoing account, a survey of Esposito's career as composer, performer and scholar is consequently richly interesting on many levels, and sheds a fascinating light on both Irish and Italian musical life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In trying to reconstruct this career, however, the researcher is beset with practical difficulties of a kind that complicate his task considerably. Although information about Esposito's professional activities is reasonably abundant, there is a striking paucity of materials providing information about his personal life and the earlier phases of his career. As is explained in the Epilogue, virtually all of Esposito's personal papers have disappeared without trace, and only a handful of his letters are known to be extant. For information about many aspects of his life, particularly his childhood and early adulthood, one is almost wholly reliant on a small commemorative monograph in Italian that was published in Esposito's birthplace of Castellammare di Stabia in 1956,

Al musicista Michele Esposito nel prima centenario della nascita, a title which might be loosely translated as 'In commemoration of the musician Michele Esposito on the centenary of his birth'. A few remarks should be made about this book here, as its authorship has been disputed in several publications and it has been the subject of various misunderstandings.

This monograph was the brainchild of Giuseppe Lauro Aiello, a local historian who both contributed to it and edited it. It comprises four sections, the first of which is a tribute by the distinguished Italian conductor Vittorio Gui, who befriended Esposito at the end of his life and came to know him fairly well. The second section is an extended biographical sketch of the composer's career by Aiello himself. The third section is a catalogue of Esposito's compositions, which is unattributed, but may well have been compiled by the author of the fourth section, Otello Calbi, a composer and member of staff at the Naples Conservatoire, who contributed a concluding essay on Esposito's music.

In 1995, John Bowyer Bell published an article in the periodical *Éire-Ireland* in which he asserted that the biographical section of this book had in fact been written by the composer's son Mario Esposito, adducing as evidence the fact that when Mario presented a copy to his Irish relative Morgan Dockrell in 1968 he crossed out Aiello's name on the title page and replaced it with his own.[1] The matter does not appear to be quite that simple, however, and there is persuasive evidence on purely stylistic grounds to cast a doubt on Mario's claim to authorship. If one examines his published writings on medieval Hiberno-Latin literature — a subject on which Mario was a leading authority — it is immediately evident that he was a man of remarkable intelligence and erudition. As one might expect from a scholar with a disciplined and critical cast of mind, these publications are models of clarity, lucidly expressed and meticulously referenced. The biographical chapter in the Aiello book, on the other hand, is anything but scholarly. It is couched in bombastic, effusive language redolent of the worst excesses of nineteenth-century biography and presents a mawkishly idealized, wholly two-dimensional view of its subject. It contains glaring misprints and other errors. It is poorly structured, chaotic in its presentation of information and frustratingly imprecise about facts and dates. Documents are regularly quoted without indications of their source, and sometimes even without indications of when they were written or by whom. In short, it is a thoroughly amateurish production — exactly the kind of thing one might expect from an amateur local historian, which Aiello was.

To be fair to Bell, Mario makes similar claims about the book in a letter to the Belgian historian Hubert Silvestre, a fellow medievalist, which contains the following passage:

1 J. Bowyer Bell, 'Waiting for Mario: the Espositos, Joyce and Beckett', *Eire-Ireland* 30, 2 (1995), 11, 20. This assertion is also repeated in Richard Pine and Charles Acton, eds., *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin, 1998), 561–62, 77n

> Je tiens à vous faire remarquer que je suis moi-même l'auteur de presque tout ce livre, mais il m'a semblé préférable de ne pas mettre mon nom sur le titre. Mon langage a été souvent altéré et des additions d'authenticité douteuse ont été faites. *Les épreuves ne me furent pas soumises ...*
>
> [I am anxious to make you aware that I wrote virtually all this book myself, but it seemed to me preferable that my name should not appear on the title page. My language has been often altered and additions of questionable authenticity have been made. *The proofs were not shown to me ...*][2]

One the face of it, these remarks might seem to leave little room for doubt about his authorship, but they are still difficult to reconcile with the actual nature of the book. Moreover, Mario's claim to have written 'virtually all' of it is almost certainly an exaggeration: Otello Calbi undoubtedly existed and there seems no reason to doubt that he contributed the concluding essay on the music.

A plausible explanation for this conundrum is not too hard to find if one turns to consider Aiello's prefatory remarks in which he describes how the book came to be written. In 1955, it came to his attention that plans were afoot in Dublin to commemorate the centenary of Esposito's birth. Feeling it would be a great pity if this event passed unmarked in the composer's native town, he conceived the idea of producing a commemorative publication. He goes on to explain in his rather stilted and self-consciously 'literary' prose, of which the following is a representative sample:

> La raccolta degli elementi necessari per fare opera degna, si presentava però irta di difficoltà. Dove trovare le notizie, i dati, i documenti, e almeno una fotografia di Michele Esposito? Un primo, ma ben luminoso fascio di luce ci venne dal Maestro Vittorio Gui, che si risultava essere stato amico di Michele Esposito. Interpellato, con un semplice biglietto, il Maestro Gui rispose con una lettera che è lo specchio di quanta possa un animo nobile quando è spinto dal sentimento ... . Fu in seguito possibile metterci in rapporti epistolari con i congiunti del Maestro Esposito e propriamente col figlio Mario, residente a Firenze ... . Giunsero, così, musica, notizie, fotografie: un'autentica scoperta, una documentazione emozionante, una vera rivelazione! Preziose informazioni ci pervennero anche da Dublino. ... Il Maestro Gui, col suo consiglio, alimentava un fuoco che ormai non poteva più spegnersi.

2 Letter from Mario Esposito to Hubert Silvestre, 28 July 1958, quoted in Hubert Silvestre, 'Mario Esposito. Brève evocation de sa vie et de son oeuvre', in Mario Esposito, *Studies in Hiberno-Latin Literature*, ed. Michael M. Gorman (Aldershot, 2006), 1–13, 4. Emphasis in the original.

> Assembling the necessary materials to produce a work worthy [of its subject] seemed fraught with difficulties. Where could I find the information, the dates, the documents and at least a photograph of Michele Esposito? A first, but brightly luminous ray of light reached us from Maestro Vittorio Gui, who, it transpired, had been a friend of Michele Esposito. Consulted by means of a brief note, Maestro Gui responded with a letter revealing what a noble heart is capable of when moved by emotion .... As a result, it was possible to enter into correspondence with Maestro Esposito's relatives and in particular with his son Mario who resided in Florence .... In this way, I obtained music, information and photographs — a real discovery, exciting documentation, a true revelation! Valuable information also reached me from Dublin. ... Maestro Gui, with his advice, nourished a fire which henceforth could never be extinguished.[3]

From this, it seems clear that Mario supplied information by letter and is thus the 'author' of the biographical chapter in the sense that Aiello had drawn extensively on his contributions, but not in any literal sense. In the absence of the original documentation, the factual accuracy of Aiello's essay must remain open to question: as Mario informed Silvestre, he was never shown the proofs and had no opportunity to correct various errors that had crept in.[4] As a result, although the monograph contains a great deal of useful information, it cannot be considered altogether reliable.

Fortunately, documentation about Esposito's career becomes much more abundant after he moved to Ireland in 1882, and it has proved possible to piece together a fairly detailed — and, one hopes, more or less accurate — account of his professional activities from articles in contemporary newspapers and periodicals, as well as various works of reference. I would like to acknowledge my particular indebtedness to the standard history of the Royal Irish Academy of Music edited jointly by Richard Pine and Charles Acton, *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998*, which contains a great deal of useful information not readily available elsewhere.

In addition to the difficulties inherent in giving a satisfactory account of Esposito's life, it is also impossible, as matters stand, to offer a comprehensive evaluation of his creative achievement. Some of his most important compositions — including two piano concertos, several major orchestral works, a string quartet, a piano quintet and two piano quartets — were not published in his lifetime and the manuscripts seem to have disappeared along with his personal papers, together with the full orchestral scores of his

3 Giuseppe Lauro Aiello, ed., *Al musicista Michele Esposito nel prima centenario della nascita* (Castellammare di Stabia, 1956), 14–15; hereafter *Al musicista*. The spelling of Gui's name has been standardized from the variant form 'Guy'.

4 Mario sent Hubert Silvestre a copy of the Aiello monograph which is annotated in his own hand: see Michael M. Gorman, 'Mario Esposito (1887–1975) and the Study of the Latin Literature of Medieval Ireland', in Esposito, *Studies in Hiberno-Latin Literature*, 312, 46n. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Gorman for making a copy of this document for me. Unfortunately, the annotations provide little new information of significance and mostly indicate typographical errors in the text.

two operas and the cantata Deirdre. (Fortunately the vocal scores of these have survived, as they were published). In the cases of the works that have been lost, the researcher is entirely reliant on newspaper reviews or published programme notes for an idea of what they might have been like. Should these scores ever come to light, they could well add considerably to Esposito's stature as a composer. Only one commercial recording of music by Esposito is currently available — a selection of his piano works performed by the Irish pianist Miċeal O'Rourke which was issued on the Chandos label, recorded in 1997.[5] It is to be hoped that the present study might help to revive interest in this unjustly neglected figure and stimulate further performances of his work.

5 *Esposito: Works for Piano*, CHAN 9675

3 Working in Ireland, 1882–99

On arriving in Dublin, Esposito probably did not expect to stay there for very long, no doubt regarding his RIAM post as a convenient stopgap until he managed to obtain a better position elsewhere, perhaps in England. In the event, he was to remain for forty-six years. Unfortunately, while Esposito's professional activities in Ireland are quite well documented, we know little about his personal life, or his responses towards his new surroundings. His adaptation to life in a new country was initially made all the more difficult by his ignorance of English, a language he had to get to grips with as a matter of urgency, not least if he were to communicate adequately with his students. (The second language of most Italians at that time was French). Fortunately, Natalia's impressive linguistic skills extended to a command of English (she also spoke fluent French, German and Italian in addition to her native Russian), and she was able to act as a translator for him in the early stages. The young couple took lodgings at 6 Brighton Vale, Monkstown — a pleasant suburb to the south of the city.[1] Esposito's friend and fellow countryman Caracciolo provided much practical help and smoothed his way by effecting introductions of various kinds.[2] According to Aiello, Michele and Natalia made a determined effort to produce a favourable impression on the people that they encountered and were generally successful in doing so.[3]

1 Gorman, 'Mario Esposito', 301n. A list of the family's subsequent residences is given in Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 196n.

2 Unfortunately Caracciolo continued to suffer from ill-heath and was forced to leave Dublin a few years later. His friends staged a benefit concert for him in Leinster Hall in June 1887, but he died a month later: see 'Complimentary Benefit Concert to Signor Luigi Caracciolo', *Irish Times*, 6 June 1887; and 'Sudden Death of Signor Caracciolo', *Irish Times*, 23 July 1887.

3 Aiello, *Al musicista*, 38

Nonetheless, adjusting to their new circumstances must have required a considerable mental effort from both of them. Natalia in particular found the Irish climate difficult and their surroundings probably presented a great deal else that struck them as new and strange. It must also have taken some time to become attuned to the complex conditions prevailing in the country. On the face of it, Dublin was simply another Victorian city in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, still possessed of a faded grandeur lingering from its Georgian heyday, with a citizenry ostensibly loyal to the Crown. Yet underneath the apparently placid surface of everyday life, Irish society was deeply divided along religious, social and political lines. The years immediately following Esposito's arrival in the country were marked by growing unrest, leading to increasingly insistent calls for a greater measure of Irish political autonomy and the introduction of Home Rule.

From a purely artistic point of view, musical life in Dublin must have seemed very impoverished in comparison with Paris, or even Naples, for all its shortcomings. Such professional concert life as existed was sustained largely by visiting artists. The city lacked a professional orchestra, as well as a full-time professional opera or ballet company. Although circumstances would improve to some extent during the 1880s — in no small part due to Esposito's efforts — it was widely acknowledged that the outlook for music in Ireland was rather bleak. In 1886, only a few years after Esposito came to Ireland, Charles Larcom Graves, the brother of Alfred Perceval Graves and himself a distinguished man of letters, contributed a piece on the current state of Irish music to the *Musical Times*, which articulated this view in a forceful manner. In Graves's analysis, the sluggish development of native musical infrastructures was not due to any lack of native talent, but rather to local in-fighting which had rendered progress impossible. As a result, such talented musicians as the country produced were left with no choice but to leave, as Ireland offered little scope for a satisfying career:

> I may be allowed to remark how the careers of [Sullivan and Stanford] illustrate the dependence of Irish genius on foreign surroundings. In the present state of affairs this could hardly be otherwise, for the Irish capital does not support a good orchestra, it is sadly in want of a good Concert hall, while the notorious cliquishness of Dublin musical society, owing to a lack of an *entente cordiale* between the chief musical authorities, has sadly hindered the progress of the art in that classic city. Few Irish names are to be found in the ranks of distinguished instrumentalists or executants, and we have already adverted to the lack of a first rate Irish chorus.[4]

These forthright comments elicited a rather heated response from Joseph Robinson, a prominent Dublin musician who had a considerable reputation as a conductor and a teacher at the RIAM. Robinson was understandably anxious to redress the rather negative

4 Charles Larcom Graves, 'Musical Talent in Ireland', *Musical Times*, 27, 524 (1886), 582

picture presented by Graves, pointing to the activities of his own Dublin Musical Society and the concerts it had mounted over the years. Nonetheless, Robinson admitted that he had no choice but to augment the orchestras for these concerts with British players, as skilled local instrumentalists were in short supply. He pointed out that this was scarcely surprising, in view of the poverty of the country and what he described as the 'indifferent' quality of musical education that was generally available. He also identified another crucial factor that accounted for the retarded growth of Irish musical life — the comparative absence of patronage or adequate public support for native musical ventures. Robinson roundly condemned 'the utter indifference shown by the aristocracy and wealthy mercantile class of this city in the advancement of musical art in Ireland' — a remark which clearly suggests that he did not hold a very high opinion of his fellow Anglo-Irish and regarded most of them as philistines. He concluded his riposte with the contention: 'Until these causes disappear, we cannot expect that either patriotism, which is satisfied with brass bands, or an *entente cordiale* between the musical authorities, which exists scarcely anywhere, will remove this reproach.'[5]

The Royal Irish Academy of Music, in which Esposito was to take up his teaching post, was still a fairly young institution, having been founded in 1848. Like many or even most Irish institutions at this period, it was set up by prominent representatives of the Anglo-Irish ruling class and largely reflected its ethos. Although the RIAM's teaching staff was not large and, for obvious reasons, it could hardly hope to compare with larger conservatoires on the continent in terms of resources and prestige, it nonetheless provided some of the best instrumental and vocal tuition that was available in the country. Some of the most notable Irish musicians of the day had been employed there — including Joseph Robinson and the composer Sir Robert Prescott Stewart — but by the time Esposito was appointed, their influence was on the wane.[6] In their desire to appoint the most able teachers, the institution's management began to appoint foreigners, mostly Germans or Italians. Caracciolo was offered a post in 1876 and Carl Lauer, a professor of violin, joined the staff in 1877. Esposito's appointment clearly continued this trend which was maintained throughout the 1880s and resulted in a fairly cosmopolitan staff that contributed notably to musical activity in the city. The young Italian thus took up his post at a time when the institution was undergoing considerable change. During the 1870s and 1880s its managerial structures were radically overhauled to function on a more democratic basis and a concerted effort was made to provide tuition to students from less privileged backgrounds. From 1882, the RIAM's finances improved due to bequests and royal patronage, which made it feasible to offer new scholarships;[7] and when the Royal

5 Letter to the Editor from Joseph Robinson, 24 October 1886, *Musical Times*, 27, 525 (1886), 677–78

6 John F. Larchet, remarked that Esposito took up his post at a time when, 'with the waning powers of Joseph Robinson ... and Sir Robert Stewart, the old order was passing': see Larchet, 'Michele Esposito', 430.

7 See Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 109ff.

College of Music was founded in London in 1883, an institution designed to serve the whole of the United Kingdom and the British Empire, it became possible for particularly talented Irish students to enrol there for courses of more advanced study.

Esposito gave his inaugural piano recital at the RIAM on 13 June 1882. The programme was almost the same as his last Parisian recital, and was clearly intended to demonstrate his talents as a pianist and composer. By all accounts, the event went very well. From a notice in the *Musical Times* (which described him as an 'able executant') we learn that he played from memory five compositions of his own (his *Capriccio*, Op. 11; his recently published *Tre pezzi*, Op. 26; and the *Allegro appassionato* from the Op. 7 collection), an unidentified nocturne and the A flat Polonaise by Chopin, Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata, in addition to compositions by Rameau and Schumann.[8] The Dublin audience and critics were impressed by his pianistic talent, but his extrovert style of performance evidently took some by surprise:

> There was a crowded audience. Signor Esposito comes from the land of song being an Italian. He proved himself an artist of vast technical power and of high accomplishments. He played from memory twelve long pieces. Five of these were compositions of his own .... His technical powers seem adequate to any difficulties. His scale-playing and octave-playing with both hands are perfect. His phrasing is very finished, and he can play — when he so wills — with a delicacy that could of itself hush an audience into silent listening. But we must be pardoned for hinting that we think his double *fortes* pass beyond the limit of human expression, and tend to become a noise. Indeed, extreme force of this sort is a characteristic of his style. Precedent for this style may be sought in the occasional mannerisms of some princely artists — even Rubinstein — but we venture to think the direction is a wrong one in which to go. There is a limit to the powers of the pianoforte. The player should not try to wring out of it effects like those of a great organ or a band of a hundred performers. Force of idea, depth of sentiment, richness of counterpoint, exquisite phrasing, are its real sources of power. Even a treble *forte* should be attained without giving the ear the slightest blow — and to borrow a comparison from another art – has not Doré, the painter, infused immense expression into very small pictures? Bating this peculiarity, the Signor's [sic] playing was beyond question masterly.[9]

The concert was also reviewed in the *Archivio musicale*: his former Italian colleagues were clearly curious to hear news of his latest activities.

Although we have no precise information on the subject, Esposito evidently found his post sufficiently congenial to want to stay in Dublin, and his temporary contract was

8 *Musical Times*, 23, 473 (1882), 401

9 *Freeman's Journal*, 15 June 1882

duly extended. His reputation grew rapidly and he was much sought after as a teacher. In addition to working at the RIAM (which by 1889 brought in about £175 per annum),[10] he supplemented his income by taking students at several Dublin schools, including Blackrock College and Alexandra College. Of the other pianists on the RIAM staff, only the reputedly brilliant but eccentric Alexandre Billet possessed abilities comparable to his own. However, Billet was already sixty-five years of age when Esposito came to Dublin and he seems to have felt rather eclipsed by his younger and dynamic colleague, who in a comparatively short time had succeeded in establishing himself as the city's leading piano teacher.[11] Apart from Billet, however, he evidently succeeded in winning the respect and confidence of his colleagues, as he was appointed to the RIAM Board of Studies in 1883,[12] but was also elected to represent the Professors on the Board of Governors of the institution in May 1888.[13] Interestingly, on the latter occasion, the other principal contender for the position was none other than Joseph Robinson. This event provided a striking indication of the extent to which the balance of power within the institution had shifted in favour of the young guard. Although Robinson's defeat generated a certain amount of acrimony, Esposito nonetheless held this position until 1911.[14]

As a teacher, Esposito seems to have been admired and liked by his students, even if they found him somewhat intimidating. He generally shared his teaching with an assistant, to whom he delegated the responsibility for the initial preparation of pieces with students (such as deciding on fingering and ensuring basic fidelity to the musical text), in addition to the study of technical exercises. The underlying rationale for this system was to spare Esposito a certain amount of drudge and to allow him to concentrate on musical interpretation at a higher level.[15] At the lesson, Esposito took up his position at his own Érard piano, next to that of his pupil, interrupting the student if necessary to demonstrate a point. By all accounts, his lessons were highly stimulating and rewarding. The Irish composer Frederick May, who studied with him for a time, recalled his former teacher as 'much more than a mere pianoforte professor':

> He was a great musical scholar, besides being a fine conductor and a distinguished composer, so that lessons from him were a liberal education in music. His beetling

10 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 153

11 This seems to be confirmed by a letter Billet sent to the RIAM Board of Governors in which, without mentioning any names, he complained of being undermined and that 'everything has been done to diminish my influence ... ': see Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 257–58. It appears that students were reluctant to study with him — perhaps because of his eccentric manner. Billet's relationship with the management seems to have deteriorated progressively, and he was eventually pensioned off on grounds of ill-health in 1894.

12 *Freeman's Journal*, 24 February 1883

13 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 162

14 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 162

15 Enid Starkie, *A Lady's Child* (London, 1941), 237

> eyebrows, hawk-like eyes and bushy moustache concealed a kindly nature, although he could be abrupt and sarcastic at times. He was steeped in the literature as well as the music of his homeland, and his eyes always softened when he spoke of the great Italian poets, particularly Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* he regarded as the greatest book ever written. He managed to spare the time too to look through and advise on the juvenile efforts of a young would-be composer, and I remember his somewhat sardonic answer to a query as to whether or not they showed any promise of future development. 'Some develop early, some develop late, and some never develop.' Although he lived in Ireland for so long, his English always remained strongly idiomatic ... [16]

The distinguished Oxford academic Enid Starkie, who later gained international renown for her biographies of Rimbaud and Flaubert, studied as a young girl with Esposito at the RIAM and left a vivid account of these lessons in her autobiography *A Lady's Child*:

> He was a very fine musician, probably the finest musician whose services Ireland has ever enjoyed .... I used to feel very nervous when I went for my lesson with him and I never learned to grow out of this fear. There was a second piano in his teaching room, a grand piano, an Érard, his own property, and on this he played in unison with us as we played on the practice piano. This was a nerve-racking experience, and I was always afraid of not being able to keep up with him in the difficult passages and of dropping out of what always seemed to me a contest. When we muddled a run or struck a wrong note he used to open his mouth wide, and horrible sounds gushed out from the back of his throat, as if he were gargling. 'Grrr! Grrr! Stop! Stop! Basta!' he used to roar, banging his hands down on the notes of the piano and making us jump from the music stool with terror. 'Grrr! Grrr! You play ze sentimento but you cannot play ze notes!'[17]

Esposito, though kind-hearted, did not suffer fools gladly and was prone to wild outbursts of temper during lessons. Starkie recalled him as volatile and unpredictable:

> We never knew in what mood we were going to find him. Sometimes he was in a gentle and melancholy mood, and then he played with devastating sadness on his own piano and we were inspired to play better than usual, or rather we did not know but that these lovely sounds came from our piano as well as from his Érard. Sometimes everything would go wrong and he would bang loudly on the piano from the very first notes and then get up and stamp round the room in anger. Sometimes, with apparent patience, frigid patience, he would set about explaining everything from the very

16 Frederick May, untitled reminiscences, in Pine and Action, *To Talent Alone*, 391–92
17 Starkie, *A Lady's Child*, 238

beginning, as if to a child just starting music, and I much preferred his open anger to this layer of ice over the boiling lava of the Vesuvius of his native province.

I feared more than anything else the moment when Esposito began to explain everything from the very beginning. I can remember one occasion in particular, when he was in a nasty temper, and he humiliated me with sadistic pleasure. I was then learning the *Liebestraum* of Liszt, and in those adolescent days I thought it beautiful. That day I was playing it with what I thought was deep feeling and emotion, but had I looked over at Esposito I would have seen the sarcastic expression on his face. I thought that I was doing very well indeed, for he was allowing me to play to the end, not stopping me every few bars as he usually did, and he was encouraging me on his piano to further sentimental expression. In my foolish youthful pride I imagined that I was interesting him, and that he was pleased with me, that in fact my playing was moving him, and I laid on the sentiment and the emotion more and more thickly. As I ended I had tears in my own eyes, so touched was I by my playing. When I had played the last chord I looked over at him, expecting approbation, but I only saw on his face an expression of extreme disgust. 'That was beeootifool! Veramente bellissima! Beeootifool!' he said, in exaggerated, mock-admiring tones, looking at me with his most ironic expression, the expression which always made me squirm. I have rarely felt as small as I felt that afternoon, as coarse and vulgar in my emotions. For weeks after that I did not dare ask for anything except Bach, Czerny, or Haydn to study, works into which I could put no romantic expression.[18]

A former student, Thomas Weaving, also recalled how sharp-tongued he could be. On one occasion, a particularly unresponsive pupil wished him a happy Christmas. Esposito retorted: 'I don't wish you a happy Christmas! You've played the same music all this term and it's got worse and worse. Next term you go to the third grade if you do no better.'[19] His manifestations of displeasure were not confined to sarcasm. After hearing a hapless pupil mangle a work by Brahms, he went over to a portrait of the composer which was hanging above the mantelpiece, turned it around to face the wall, and said nothing. In the case of yet another, whose rhythmic sense seems to have left much to be desired, he eventually resorted to beating time violently with a poker.[20] He did not mellow with age. Many years later, when adjudicating for the Sligo Feis Ceoil, he was asked to judge a class of flute bands. After sitting through several hours of hideous cacophony, he announced in his idiosyncratic English: 'I am giving zis prize, not for ze best band, but for ze band zat was ze least worst.' Such a comment risked provoking an outcry from the audience, but

18 Starkie, *A Lady's Child*, 238–39
19 *Irish Times*, 8 October 1956
20 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 20

clearly its forbearance had also been stretched to the limit and his forthright comments were received with loud applause.[21] Yet, for all his irascibility, he was greatly respected. The Lurgan-born composer and pedagogue Annie Patterson remarked of him: 'He is the soul of energy and verveful activity and invariably infects even the laziest and most apathetic.'[22] Hamilton Harty, who revered him, remembered him as a man who seemed incapable of mincing his words:

> It was his uncompromising, almost brutal truthfulness which offended a great many who were too petty to appreciate the uprightness and nobility of his character. But, on the other hand, it was that very quality which appealed most strongly to his best friends, and which they revered in him. It was impossible for him to say the thing that wasn't true, even when it would have been most strongly to his advantage to do so. His occasional attempts to be 'diplomatic' and yet perfectly honest were ludicrously unsuccessful. He had a passion for 'telling the truth'.[23]

Harty recalled one particularly striking instance of his teacher's fearless honesty when he went backstage after a concert given by the great Polish pianist Paderewski in Dublin:

> Esposito came to the artists' room to pay his sincere homage to the master pianist. But it was evident there was something on his mind. Finally he could bear it no longer. 'You know,' he said with pathetic craftiness, 'my pupils *always* play a wrong note in that Étude of Chopin and — and — *so do you*!' Paderewski denied the charge with laughing warmth, but, being a great gentleman as well as a great artist, immediately sent for a copy of the piece. But, as usual, Esposito was perfectly right (though the matter was only a trifling one at the most), and the incident ended with a riotously gay dinner party and the strengthening of this deep regard felt by each artist for the other.[24]

In spite of extensive teaching commitments that consumed much of his time and energies, Esposito remained constantly active as a performer. Not long after arriving in Dublin, he took part in a benefit concert for the soprano Elizabeth Scott-Fennell, a colleague at the RIAM who was well known for her performances of Irish airs.[25] Before long, local musicians and performing groups began to invite him to participate in other events. In April 1883, Esposito organized a solo recital in the Antient Concert Rooms, in which Caracciolo, Scott-Fennell and another Dublin vocalist, Walter Bapty made guest

21 *Irish Times*, 31 October 1931
22 *Weekly Irish Times*, 20 April 1901
23 Hamilton Harty, 'Michele Esposito', *The Irish Statesman*, 7 December 1929, 276–77
24 Harty, 'Michele Esposito', 277. Paderewski visited Dublin in 1894 and 1895, and again in October 1902.
25 *Freeman's Journal*, 16 June 1882

appearances. Like his inaugural recital at the RIAM, this was also very well received. The reviewer for the *Freeman's Journal* declared that the Italian 'displayed the power and finish of a master', and noted that he drew 'hearty plaudits from the audience at the end of each piece'.[26] Such solo recitals, supported by colleagues from the RIAM, thereafter became an annual event. He gave readily of his services for fundraising concerts in aid of charitable causes — and continued to do so for the rest of his career. It is not known how regularly he performed outside Dublin, but he appeared to have received occasional invitations to other Irish cities — including one to appear as soloist in the Mendelssohn Piano Concerto in G minor with 'Mr Cohen's Orchestra' in Belfast in February 1884.[27] He also gave public concerts at the Antient Concert Rooms under the patronage of aristocrats such as Lady Power, Countess of Granard and the Baroness de Cussy,[28] and he would often appear as soloist in prominent charity events, such as one organized under the patronage of the Duchess of Carnarvon and the Princess of Saxe Weimar to raise funds for St Patrick's Home for Nurses.[29]

In July 1885, he had the opportunity to give a joint recital in Dublin with his former teacher Benjamino Cesi, who had just returned from a tour of Russia (where he would soon return to live) and was now making a tour of Britain and Ireland. The duo works on the programme included Saint-Saëns's *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven* and a transcription of the same composer's *Danse macabre*. Cesi performed solos by Scarlatti, Handel and Chopin, as well as his own arrangement of the minuet from Thomas's *Mignon* and Thalberg's *Variations sur L'Elisir d'amore*.[30]

Encouraged perhaps by the success of this and other recent public appearances, Esposito gradually expanded the range of his performing activities and organized a series of chamber music concerts. The first of these took place on 1 February 1886 in the Antient Concert Rooms, on which occasion he was joined by his RIAM colleagues Lauer, Griffith and Rudersdorff. The programme, which made no concessions to popular taste, consisted of Raff's Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 102, and Brahms's Piano Quartet in A major, Op. 26. The music of Brahms was relatively unfamiliar in Ireland at the time, and some audience members evidently found the Piano Quartet rather forbidding. The reviewer for the *Freeman's Journal* remarked: 'It is somewhat long, and some passages in it are far from being easy of comprehension, and would require from the ordinary hearer more than one hearing to grasp and properly appreciate their beauty.'[31] The programmes

26 *Freeman's Journal*, 21 April 1883

27 *The Belfast News-Letter*, 23 February 1884. In later years Esposito would visit Belfast to contribute to Edwyn Wolseley's 'Ballad Concerts' at the Ulster Hall in collaboration with Collison, and he was often invited to act as accompanist for instrumentalists at solo recitals: see, for example, *Musical Times*, 43, 708 (1902), 118, for a notice of concert that he gave with the violinist Montagu-Nathan on 10 January 1902.

28 *Freeman's Journal*, 10 and 12 April 1884

29 *Freeman's Journal*, 10 December 1885

30 *Freeman's Journal*, 3 July 1885

31 *Freeman's Journal*, 2 February 1886

for the two subsequent concerts were equally substantial and included piano trios and quartets by Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann, as well as two works by contemporary composers — Saint-Saëns's Piano Trio in B flat and Rubinstein's Violin Sonata.

Opportunities for him to present further concerts of this nature were greatly increased by a significant development in 1886, when the Royal Dublin Society (RDS), a body established in 1731 to further the growth of agriculture, science and industry, extended its patronage to music and decided to inaugurate a series of 'popular recitals'. It was envisaged that these should promote chamber music — a form of music-making with which Dublin audiences had only a limited familiarity — and a sum of money 'not exceeding £100 and the proceeds of the sale of tickets' was set aside to cover costs.[32] Committees to oversee this new venture were duly appointed and plans were laid. It was decided to hold the concerts in the Society's Lecture Theatre in Leinster House, Kildare Street, and to present them as a weekly series over a period of about two months. Members of the Society were to be admitted free (as were students of the RIAM sometimes),[33] and the price for tickets for the general public was fixed at two shillings. Thereafter, matters progressed swiftly and the inaugural concert in the series took place on 22 March 1886.

In organizing this venture, the committee relied heavily on the advice of Esposito to devise programmes and engage artists. He was naturally invited to participate as a performer: in addition to giving solo recitals, he also gave programmes of chamber music with colleagues from the RIAM in the first and in subsequent series. This arrangement had several advantages. Not least, it provided a platform for these musicians to perform rewarding repertoire of this nature, since similar outlets for their talents were in fairly short supply. It also allowed them to evolve a distinctive performing style and to develop as an ensemble. The programmes on these occasions generally consisted of a chamber work without piano, a larger work with piano (such as a piano trio, quartet or quintet), and a sonata for solo violin or cello with piano. This pattern was established as early as the second concert, when Mozart's Quartet K. 464 in A was given together with Beethoven's Violin, Op. 30/2 in C minor, and Schubert's late Piano Trio in B flat.

The enterprise also had an educational dimension: pre-concert talks (as we would now call them) were given by Arthur Patton and the brilliant polymath John Pentland Mahaffy (who, in addition to his other areas of expertise, also held a doctorate in music) to large audiences of four hundred or more. An article that appeared in the *Freeman's Journal* after the first concert stressed the important role the series could play in raising the general level of musical taste:

32 Hughes, 'The Society and Music', 265

33 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 214

> ... the true art of music is in sore want of such assistance. All the public efforts which have been hitherto made ... have been directed to training *performers*. But it is quite as essential that we, the hearers, should receive training too, until at least we become able to distinguish that which is best in the art when it is placed before us; and further, it is most desirable there should be an adequate exhibition to the public of the noblest productions with which the world has been endowed by its most gifted composers.[34]

The first series of RDS concerts was a resounding success and undoubtedly represented an event of landmark significance in the musical life of Dublin. So popular did the concerts prove that it was proposed to put on two further series in the autumn of 1886 and spring of 1887. As the introductory talks had also proved popular, suggesting that audience members were genuinely eager to learn something about the works being performed, Robert Prescott Stewart was asked to provide analytical notes (in the manner of Grove's programme notes for the Crystal Palace concerts in London) for the recitals between January and March 1887. Even more gratifyingly, some members of the general public requested that works be given more than once, to allow listeners to assimilate them more completely. The Committee readily acquiesced in this proposal and from November 1887 programmes given on a Monday evening were repeated the following Monday afternoon. This practice continued for some years.[35]

The concerts presented by Esposito and his colleagues for the remainder of the decade featured an impressively wide range of music, ensuring that the RDS series could bear favourable comparison with similar concert series in London at the period, such as those organized by Edward Dannreuther.[36] In addition to standard repertoire by composers of the Classical and early Romantic eras, the programmes included much music by living composers such as Brahms, Rubinstein, Grieg, Stanford and Saint-Saëns, as well as others whose names are less well-known today. Interestingly, some of this modern repertoire, such as the Brahms violin sonatas, proved so appealing to audiences that it even came to be programmed by popular request.

The sheer quantity of music that Esposito performed during these years is an eloquent testimony to his exceptional ability to assimilate scores rapidly, and to judge from contemporary accounts, the standard of his playing seems to have been consistently high. His remarkable talents did not go unnoticed by audiences and critics, and engendered something approaching hero-worship. His Beethoven playing was particularly admired: a

34 Freeman's Journal, 23 March 1886

35 Hughes, 'The Society and Music', 266

36 See Dibble, 'Edward Dannreuther and the Orme Square Phenomenon', in Bashford, Christina and Langley, Leanne, eds., *Music and British Culture, 1785–1914: Essays in honour of Cyril Ehrlich* (Oxford, 2000), 275–98.

performance of the Beethoven A major Cello Sonata that he gave in 1889 with Rudersdorff, for example, was described as being 'in a manner which might almost be said to be unrivalled.'[37] The reviewer on this occasion also remarked on the enduring popularity of these recitals, noting that they continued 'to attract an assemblage of musical amateurs that overcrowds the little theatre of the Institution every Monday'.[38]

The winter series of 1889 featured three solo piano recitals by Esposito with enterprising programmes that included a selection of pieces by Rameau, Couperin, Frescobaldi, Grazioli and Scarlatti, in addition to more standard repertoire such as Schumann's *Carnival*, Beethoven's Sonata in E flat, Op. 31/3, and shorter works by Chopin. The compositions by Italian Baroque composers were performed in transcriptions by his former teacher Cesi, who had played a prominent role in reviving interest in the keyboard works of Frescobaldi, Galuppi and other neglected figures from this era. The concert met once again with an exceptionally positive reception from the Dublin critics. Much of the music was unfamiliar to them — even Schumann's *Carnival* — but they clearly found the concerts highly enjoyable. The reviewer for the *Freeman's Journal* noted enthusiastically: 'Signor Esposito's playing of all this excessively difficult music was masterly. Not a blemish or imperfection shadowed his performance throughout.'[39]

Esposito's solo recitals in 1889 proved so popular that he was asked to give another series of three programmes the following year (which, because of the established practice of repeats, amounted to six concerts) between 20 October and 24 November 1890. In the same manner as before, he commenced each concert with items of early keyboard music. The first featured Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue* and an *Allegro con fuoco* by Paradisi; the second included Handel's popular *Air with Variations* (nicknamed 'The Harmonious Blacksmith'), Couperin's *L'Ausonienne* and Rameau's *Le Tambourin*; while the third introduced further works edited by Cesi, including an *Adagio* in D by Galuppi and Scarlatti's *Fuga del gatto* [Cat's Fugue]. The central item of each programme was a piano sonata — respectively, Weber's Sonata in A flat, Op. 39, and Beethoven's *Appassionata* and *Les Adieux* sonatas — and they concluded with works from the Romantic era by Chopin, Mendelssohn, Liszt (some of his Schubert *Lieder* transcriptions) and Schumann.

By 1890 Esposito had established himself as a leading figure in Dublin musical life, which had already been greatly enriched by his artistic initiatives. It would be interesting to know more about his personal circumstances and inner life during this period, but as so little of his correspondence has survived, information of this nature is almost entirely lacking. He and his wife seem to have enjoyed a good standard of living, judging from the fact that they could afford to employ servants.[40] Nor do they seem to have experienced

37 Irish Times, 5 February 1889
38 Irish Times, 5 February 1889
39 Freeman's Journal, 12 November 1889
40 Watton, Michele Esposito, 8

difficulty in making friends, as Natalia maintained a salon which was frequented by writers, musicians and other prominent members of Dublin society. From the few anecdotes which have come down to us, Esposito's wife appears to have been a rather colourful figure and was evidently rather formidable. She insisted on being addressed as 'Madame' and according to her son Mario was an atheist, 'indifferent — even hostile — to religion', no doubt occasioning much scandalized comment on this account. [41] In the course of the 1880s, they had three more children: a second daughter Vera was born on 13 September 1883; Mario, their only son, on 7 September 1887, and Nina, a third daughter, on 2 January 1890.[42] The children grew up speaking English, Italian and French.[43] The three daughters were later educated privately at Alexandra College. Mario seems to have been a remarkably precocious child: his mother, whose philosophical sympathies evidently inclined towards materialism, strongly encouraged his interest in science, even going so far as to install a small laboratory in the house, and generally did everything she could to foster his intellectual development. In a letter of 1959 to the Belgian medievalist Hubert Silvestre, Mario recalled discussions with her about the writings of figures such as Voltaire, Comte and Darwin, and receiving a present at the age of eleven of Alexander von Humboldt's celebrated five-volume *magnum opus* on the natural sciences, *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*.[44] In his teens, however, Mario's interests turned towards philology, under the influence of M. R. Best, a young Celtic philologist who worked in the National Library, and he went on to become a leading expert on the corpus of Latin literature written in Ireland during the Middle Ages. Despite the foreign origins of both their parents, there is no indication that the Esposito children experienced any difficulty in integrating socially, and they quickly grew accustomed to the habitual mispronunciation of their surname by Dubliners who erroneously accented its third syllable (the correct stress is on the second).[45]

In the absence of any definite information, it is difficult to account for the fact that Esposito virtually stopped composing for about fifteen years after moving to Dublin. Between 1887 and 1892 or thereabouts, a slender trickle of works emerged from his pen, all of them for piano: the *Scherzo* in E flat minor, Op. 28, the *Due pezzi*, Op. 29, the *Quattro bozzetti* [Four Sketches], Op. 30, and the two sets of *Progressive Studies* which constitute Op. 31, all of which were brought out by the Dublin publishing and piano manufacturing firm of Pohlmann. Thereafter, he virtually stopped composing again for five years. All of these pieces are of comparatively minor importance. The Op. 28 *Scherzo* reflects Chopin's

41 Silvestre, 'Mario Esposito', 7

42 Sometimes 1891 is given as the year of Mario's birth, but it would seem that Mario was wont to lie about his age: see his letter of 24 October 1958 to Hubert Silvestre, which is quoted in the Epilogue. Elsewhere, Mario confirmed the date of 1887: see Gorman, 'Mario Esposito', 300n.

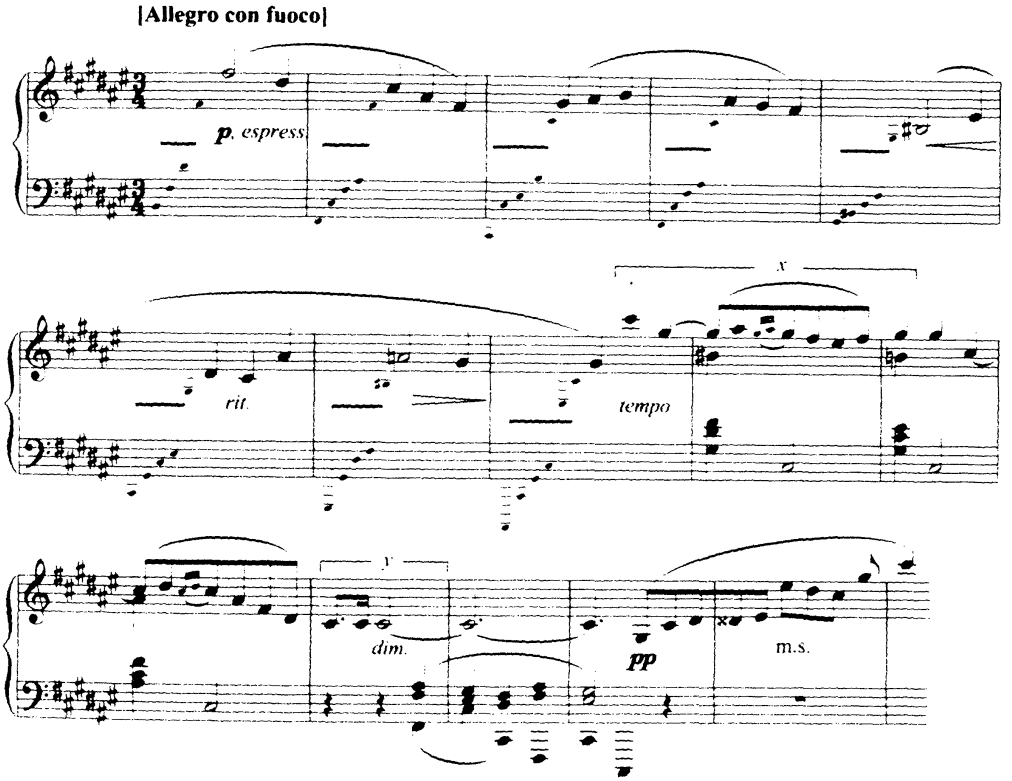
43 Gorman, *Mario Esposito*, 302

44 Letter from Mario Esposito to Hubert Silvestre, 6 February 1959, reproduced in Silvestre, 'Mario Esposito', 6–7

45 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 196

influence not only in its virtuosic style of keyboard writing, which is replete with rapid passagework and chromatic scales in thirds and double octaves, but also in the metrical ambiguity and wide tonal range of the outer sections. The work has a ternary structure, with an expansive central trio. Here Esposito introduces three strains of melody leading to the dominant which are then suffixed by two thematic fragments (designated 'x' and 'y' in Ex. 20), the latter derived from the opening material of the work. The two pieces of Op. 29 are more lighthearted in character, consisting of a dance-like *Serenata* [Serenade] and a sparklingly virtuosic *Impromptu* which has a musette-like trio in the tonic minor.

Ex. 20: *Scherzo*, Op. 28, trio section



The *Quattro bozzetti*, Op. 30, were probably composed as pedagogical pieces and may even have been intended for Esposito's more advanced pupils. The first piece, *Andantino con moto*, evokes a gondolier's song, the barcarolle-like rhythms of the left hand supporting a singing melody in the right laden with decorative acciaccaturas. The rich harmonies of the piece may reflect the influence of the composer's French contemporaries, especially Fauré: indeed, the third sketch in E major recalls the *Berceuse* from the latter's *Dolly Suite*. The second piece is an animated study in neo-Bachian style, while the last is a quick

waltz. The *Progressive Studies in Two Books*, Op. 31, were modelled on the kinds of technical exercises which Esposito had practised during his period of study in Naples, such as those of Czerny.[46]

During the 1890s, Esposito maintained the intense performing activity of the preceding decade, which continued to expand in scope. Encouraged perhaps by the success of his solo concerts in Dublin, he organized to give a recital at the Prince's Hall in London on 8 July 1891. He chose a demanding programme, which included Schumann's *Études symphoniques* and Beethoven's Sonata in C minor, Op. 111, and was joined by the violinist Guido Papini for what was probably the premiere of his First Violin Sonata, written in Paris ten years before. The reviews of the London critics confirm that the high esteem in which Esposito was held by their Dublin counterparts was by no means unjustified. The critic for *The Times* (who was probably Fuller-Maitland) wrote a highly appreciative notice:

> Signor Michele Esposito, an accomplished pianist, gave a recital of more than usual interest on Wednesday afternoon in Prince's Hall. Scarcely a single item of his programme could be called hackneyed. Schumann's *Études symphoniques* have, it is true, been heard almost incessantly this season; it is curious to look back at their composer's own low estimate of their fitness for public performance. They were thoughtfully and correctly played in strict and most unusual agreement with the earlier version. Beethoven's sonata op. 111 was given with such intelligence and feeling, and in the beautiful arietta great charm of style was shown. A graceful minuet by Grazioli, and a gigue by Scarlatti which must have been new to most hearers, succeeded the familiar and delightful variations of Handel in D minor; both the former were edited, with a good deal of respect, by Signor B. Cesi. In a melodious violin sonata of his own the player was assisted by Signor Papini. A pretty berceuse, also by Signor Esposito, was not so enthusiastically received by the audience as a less original piece by C. Albanesi, which was encored. The recital closed with a fine performance of Chopin's etude in C minor, the arpeggio study in the second set, a work most rarely heard.[47]

Also in the audience was George Grove, who was struck by the grace and elegance of the Italian's playing:

> I looked in at Esposito's recital three or four days ago. He is the chief piano-teacher at Dublin — an Italian, and I must say he pleased me very much. I heard him play a sonata of his own for violin and P., and the first 2 of the Symphonic Etudes of

46 Esposito evidently thought sufficiently highly of Czerny's studies to prepare his own edition of some of them, which was published in 1896 by Piggott.

47 'Signor Esposito's Recital', *The Times*, 10 July 1891

> Schumann's. The sonata was full of reminiscences, but very nice to hear, and somehow the Italians have (if not the tremendous technique of Paderewski and other Germans or allies of Germans) a grace and love of beauty and care for their hearers, that is very dear to me, and that seems to be fast going out of the piano-playing world. It is very like the difference between Tolstoi and Tourguénieff [Turgenev]. Tolstoi may be more terribly in earnest, but Tourguénieff is the greater and sweeter artist ... .[48]

Papini's appearance on the platform with Esposito on this occasion was by no means an isolated occurrence. The violinist had been a regular participant in the RDS series since their second season, travelling over from London for the concerts. His presence added considerable lustre to the series, as he had an international reputation and worked regularly with some of the greatest instrumentalists of the age, including Hans von Bülow and Anton Rubinstein. He was by all accounts a superb, if somewhat variable performer: Enid Starkie's brother Walter described him as 'an erratic genius', who 'produced a golden tone from his Cremona violin and in his style laid stress on all that was emotional in the music'.[49] Esposito and he clearly had an excellent musical rapport and their appearances as a duo were greeted with special pleasure by the RDS audiences. The critic of the Irish Times remarked apropos of a concert held on 2 December 1889:

> Signor Papini is such a general favourite amongst us that the hearty welcome which he received on this his first appearance for the season, was only what we would have expected; and Signor Esposito, whose brilliant performance in his recent pianoforte recitals will not soon be forgotten, has his full share of greeting also.[50]

It was to Papini that Esposito dedicated his First Violin Sonata, Op. 32, and the two men gave the work its Irish premiere at the Dublin Arts Club at 6, St Stephen's Green on 21 April 1894, to which the *Freeman's Journal* devoted a special column.[51] The same newspaper (and probably the same critic) later described the Italian duo as 'Papini the ever-beautiful, Esposito the never-failing'.[52]

In the early 1890s, Papini began to suffer from problems with his health and was eventually prevailed upon to accept a teaching position at the RIAM in 1893 by Esposito,

48 Charles Larcom Graves, *Life of Sir George Grove* (London, 1903), 374. In performing at Prince's Hall, Esposito followed Cesi and Papini who had given a series of concerts there in the summer of 1886: see *Musical Times*, 26, 510 (1885), 480–81 and 27, 522 (1886), 475.

49 Walter Starkie, 'What the Royal Dublin Society has Done for Music', *Royal Dublin Society Bi-Centenary Souvenir 1731–1931* (Dublin, 1931) 61

50 *Irish Times*, 3 December 1889

51 See *Freeman's Journal*, 23 April 1894. The work was performed by the same men for the Leinster Section of the ISM in May 1894 and was given its first hearing at the RDS on 2 March 1896.

52 *Freeman's Journal*, 5 March 1895

who perhaps hoped that a more settled lifestyle might prove conducive to his friend's recovery.[53] Initially, Papini's classes were accounted a great success, but he seems to have quickly lost interest in teaching and increasingly delegated his classes to deputies while he absented himself to fulfil performing engagements abroad. His negligence engendered much dissatisfaction amongst the students and the situation became untenable: he eventually resigned in 1896 after only three years in the post.[54] He returned to London to live, but continued to appear with Esposito in the RDS concerts until 1900. Papini was responsible for bringing about another valuable — and more permanent — addition to the instrumental staff at the RIAM in 1892: the eminent cellist Henry Bast, whose international reputation and breadth of performing experience rivalled his own. It is not clear what induced Bast to accept a teaching post in Dublin, but the prospect of a regular salary may have constituted a sufficient incentive, just as it had done in Esposito's case. He was quickly co-opted to participate in the RDS concerts, and in addition to playing in string quartets, he regularly partnered Esposito in duo sonatas and prompted the Italian to write his only major work for cello in 1898.

The RDS concerts of the 1890s proceeded along similar lines to the earlier series. Much repertoire was naturally repeated, but the programmes continued to include challenging and unfamiliar repertoire by composers such as Rheinberger, Brahms, Rubinstein and Zipoli. The series continued to feature solo recitals by Esposito which made few, if any concessions to middlebrow tastes. His recitals for 1892 as usual featured a very wide range of repertoire, ranging all the way from the Baroque keyboard works to music by living composers. Amongst the works performed were Bach's *Italian Concerto*, Mozart's Fantasy and Fugue in C minor, K394; Beethoven's Op. 111; Schumann's G minor Sonata, Op. 22; and Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, in addition to music by Scarlatti, Brahms, Liszt and Rubinstein. The final recital of the season, which was given twice on 9 and 16 May 1892, was devoted entirely to the music of Chopin — a composer with whom Esposito was considered to have a special affinity.[55] The programme on this occasion included the B flat minor Sonata, Op. 35; the *Fantaisie* in F minor, Op. 49; the *Scherzo* in C sharp minor, Op. 39; the *Ballade* in G minor, Op. 23; and representative works from the smaller genres.

It was widely recognized that the Lecture Theatre in Leinster House was not an entirely suitable venue for the concerts, as the acoustics were unsatisfactory. Eventually, in 1893 it was decided to undertake extensive remodelling of the interior to effect various improvements. For three years, until 1896, the concerts were consequently held in other venues around the city. Esposito opened the following season with a series of piano recitals in the old library of Leinster House, but this proved far from ideal — the chairs creaked, the space was cramped and it proved very uncomfortable for the audience. The committee

53 Henderson, 'Guido Papini', 234–35
54 Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 255 and 459
55 *Irish Times*, 22 November 1898

members decided to move the subsequent chamber concerts to a more capacious venue. They settled on the hall of the Royal University in Earlsfort Terrace, but the space there was found to be too cold (a problem exacerbated by inclement weather) and insufficiently intimate for chamber music. As one critic complained, 'All Signor Esposito's undoubted qualities of finish and clearness were lost. The audience, though a fairly numerous one, looked small in the big room, and nobody sat in the gallery.'[56] Finally, the RDS managed to obtain the Royal University's library, which proved more comfortable both for performers and audience, before relocating subsequently to the Council Room of Leinster House. During this time, despite the constant disturbance of routine, the concerts retained an enthusiastic following and were, as the critic of the *Musical Times* noted, 'now so sought for that it is very difficult to obtain admittance'.[57] When the concerts finally resumed in their traditional venue — the first took place on 15 March 1897 — the acoustics were found to be excellent and the space much more comfortable.[58]

From the mid-1890s, Esposito increasingly invited eminent foreign artists to take part in the series, in an effort to boost takings at the box office and also to introduce a greater variety of personnel. In February 1896, for example, the Belgian virtuoso and pupil of Moscheles and Liszt, Arthur de Greef, gave three recitals at Leinster House which included works by Beethoven, Schumann and Chopin. This trend of inviting non-resident musicians would become more marked after 1900. The concerts' programmes continued, as before, to feature standard works from the Classical and Romantic periods, interspersed with a considerable variety of new works such as Arensky's Piano Trio, Mackenzie's Piano Quartet, and Piano Quintets by Dvořák, César Franck, Saint-Saëns and Goldmark.

Esposito's workload at the RIAM increased significantly during this decade. In addition to his usual teaching duties, he took the initiative in setting up a new system of external grade examinations, along similar lines to the ones introduced a few years previously in 1889 by the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music. In 1892, a committee was formed to investigate the feasibility of such a venture. By May of the following year, matters had progressed to the point where teachers at the RIAM were requested to submit appropriate pieces for examinations of five grades.[59] Esposito naturally undertook the responsibility for devising the syllabus for the examinations in piano. The syllabi were approved in November 1893 and a prospectus published in January 1894. To begin with, these external examinations were held only in Dublin, but the scheme expanded to other centres in Galway and Belfast. As Esposito taught at many convent schools (where

56 *Freeman's Journal*, 19 December 1893

57 *Musical Times*, 37, 635 (1896), 39

58 The first concert of the 1896 season had to be given in the Library because the Lecture Theatre was not yet ready.

59 For an account of the development of the RIAM local centre examinations during Esposito's time in the RIAM, see Brian Beckett, 'Tested Teaching: The Local Centre Examination System, 1894–1994', in Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 297ff.

considerable emphasis was placed on music within the curriculum), it was a comparatively easy matter to arrange for these to become the first examination centres. The Loretto Abbey Convent schools in Rathfarnham and Bray, the Loretto Convent, St Stephen's Green, Dublin and the Dominican Convent, Falls Road, Belfast were the first to become involved in this way.[60] In the early years, Esposito did almost all of the examining himself, but after the First World War the number of candidates increased to a point where he required assistance from colleagues.[61]

In 1893 another opportunity to expand his professional activities presented itself, one that would ultimately play an important part in leading him to resume composing. This was the foundation of an Irish chapter of the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM), a British organization established by James Dawber and Henry Hiles in 1882 to represent the interests of professional musicians and to foster educational initiatives of various kinds. At first, the ISM grew strongly in the north of England, with music teachers forming the bulk of its membership, but its prestige was greatly enhanced after a conference held in London in 1886, when its ranks were swelled by a number of influential musicians. In 1893 the Duke of Edinburgh became its president and it was proposed to expand its activities to Scotland and Ireland. On 13 September of that year, Esposito attended a meeting chaired by Sir Robert Prescott Stewart to consider the matter, and it was resolved to set up an Irish branch of the ISM immediately.[62] Before long, he was appointed the body's Irish representative — a position that brought him into contact with some of the most distinguished British musicians of the period.[63] He seems to have fulfilled his duties with his usual efficiency and zeal, conscious of the responsibility of his position. In January 1895, it was decided to hold the ISM's annual conference in Dublin and Esposito helped to organize a major concert for the event which acted as showcase for the RIAM and music-making in Dublin as a whole. On this occasion, he performed two of his own piano pieces (his *Berceuse*, Op. 21/1, and the *Allegretto*, Op. 5) and he contributed a *Scherzo fugoso* to an *Irish Toy Symphony* based on traditional airs, a collaborative effort specially composed for the occasion (the other movements were an *Adagio patetico* by James Cooksey Culwick, a set of 'Erin Variations' by T. R. G. Jozé and a *Stretta finale* by Joseph Smith). Many local performers took part, together with musicians from other chapters of the ISM, some playing on toy instruments of various kinds. Esposito's fugue was described as 'a brilliantly outrageous burlesque',[64] in which the composer himself performed on the 'tuba e tremolo' [sic]. The

60 Watton, *Michele Esposito*, 55

61 Beckett, 'Tested Teaching', 299–300

62 *Freeman's Journal*, 14 September 1893. The Irish chapter was established in November 1893 together with divisions for Leinster, Ulster, Connacht and Munster. Esposito was elected for three years to the Irish council and for two years to the UK general council.

63 Esposito's first official engagement was to represent the ISM at the funeral of Sir Robert Stewart on 27 March 1894.

64 *Freeman's Journal*, 4 January 1895

conference was accounted a great success and provided a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of Irish talent outside the country.

The foundation of an Irish chapter of the ISM and the subsequent expansion of its activities during the 1890s occurred during a decade that witnessed a remarkable revitalization of national cultural life. As is well known, the talents of major literary figures such as W. B. Yeats, George Moore and Augusta Gregory came to increasing prominence at this period, while the selfless work of Douglas Hyde and his associates wrought a transformation in attitudes towards the Irish language and Gaelic culture generally. It was inevitable that these significant developments should stimulate discussion amongst leading Irish musicians, who were acutely aware of the comparative dearth of native compositional talent, and naturally wanted music to occupy a position of comparable prominence to Irish literature. Unfortunately very little detailed research has been carried out on the influence of the Gaelic and literary revivals on musical activity, or indeed on Irish composition of this period generally, but it does appear that there was a growing sense that more should be done to encourage the emergence of a native school of composers. One of the most prominent figures to articulate this view was Annie Patterson, who reiterated it tirelessly in her published writings. Patterson urged composers to seek inspiration in folk music in their efforts to formulate an Irish mode of musical utterance, holding that this was vital if 'a *new school* of composition which shall be distinct as possible' were to come into being — as she told her listeners at the 1901 Pan-Celtic Congress.[65] That she would advocate such a course of action was hardly surprising: the various nationalist schools of composition that had emerged in Eastern Europe only a few decades before had employed the folk music of their native countries with striking success and she no doubt hoped that it would lead to similar results in Ireland. At the same time, she was anxious to resist a rather narrow view that apparently prevailed in some quarters, which held that authentic 'Irish music' should adhere so closely to folk music as to consist of little more than arrangements of traditional airs. Other prominent musicians such as Herbert Hughes similarly opposed such a hopelessly restrictive attitude.[66]

Of Irish composers at the period, Charles Villiers Stanford was undoubtedly significant in suggesting what other possibilities might be open to the native composer in using folk music, although he lived in England and undoubtedly saw himself as being a British composer first and foremost, and an Irish one second. Stanford's own arrangements of Irish folk music, whatever objections may be raised against them on purist grounds, are nonetheless imaginative and skilful, and were highly popular in their day. He also

65 *Weekly Irish Times*, 7 September 1901

66 For a discussion of attitudes to folk music on the part of Irish composers at this period, see Patrick Zuk, 'Music and Nationalism', *Journal of Music in Ireland*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Jan/Feb 2002, 5–10 and Vol. 2, No. 3, Mar/Apr 2002, 25–30; and the same author's 'Music and Nationalism: The Debate Continues', Journal of Music in Ireland, Vol. 3, No. 5, Jul/Aug 2003, 12–21. See also Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin, 2006), 47ff.

demonstrated how this repertory — or stylized evocations of it — could be used as the basis for more ambitious compositions. His *Irish Symphony* (1887) and the *Irish Rhapsody No. 1* (1901), together with other works such as the comic opera *Shamus O'Brien* (1892) were not only enormously successful, but were accepted by contemporary listeners as authentic expressions of 'Irishness', though they were completely rooted in the mainstream tradition of European art music. Several Irish composers of the next generation such as Charles Wood and Hamilton Harty had no hesitation in turning to Stanford's work for models for their own endeavours in a similar vein.

Patterson's campaign to effect practical improvements in Irish musical life and to promote the work of native composers played no small part in the establishment of the first Irish national music festival, An Feis Ceoil, in 1897. According to the syllabus for that year, the Feis aimed 'at the cultivation of Irish music, and its presentation to the public in a becoming manner', in addition to promoting 'the advancement of musical education and activity in Ireland generally, so as to regain for this country, if possible, its old eminence among musical nations'.[67] The programme of events consisted of concerts and lectures devoted to Irish traditional music, as well as competitions for singers and instrumentalists, classically trained and folk musicians alike. The first Feis was in the nature of a compromise, as there had been a considerable disagreement amongst members of its steering committee (who were largely drawn from the Gaelic League and the National Literary Society founded by Yeats in 1892) over the form that the festival should assume. A sizeable nationalist faction of a somewhat extreme cast wished the Feis to concentrate on traditional music to the exclusion of everything else. At the first public meeting of the Feis committee, which took place in the Mansion House in Dublin on 15 June 1896, Esposito and Patterson raised strenuous objections to this policy. Thanks to their persistent pressuring of their fellow committee members, the syllabus was eventually enlarged. With support from his RIAM colleague Edith Oldham, Esposito succeeded in introducing a composers competition, for which works could be submitted in different categories (cantatas, overtures, string quartets, songs, part-songs and anthems) and which was open to all persons 'of Irish birth and parentage, whether resident in Ireland or elsewhere, as well as those of British or foreign parentage who have been resident in Ireland for three years'.[68] This competition, as we shall see, stimulated Esposito to resume composing after many years of near inactivity. He would also remain closely associated with the Feis as an adjudicator for the performance competitions.[69]

We know nothing about Esposito's attitude to the intensifying Irish cultural and political nationalism of these years, although it was clear that he associated closely with literary and cultural figures of very different political persuasions. It is not impossible

67 Quoted in Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair, 'The Cultural Value of Festival and Feis' in Aloys Fleischmann, ed., *Music in Ireland: A Symposium* (Cork, 1952), 210

68 *Musical Times*, 37, 644 (1896), 663–64

69 Larchet, 'Michele Esposito', 430

that he kept his views on these matters to himself, considering it to be more prudent for a foreigner to do so. Nonetheless, he was evidently interested in Irish traditional music and believed that it might offer novel expressive possibilities for creative work: this much is clear from an interview that he gave to the *Irish Independent* in February 1906, which appeared under the title 'Irish music — a chance for Irish composers'. His interviewer, the actor and playwright James Cousins, was deeply impressed by the Italian's extensive knowledge of and evident sympathy for Irish culture and was led to declare that Esposito 'had grown into our civic and national life more truly and firmly than many an individual who is Irish only by the accident of birth'. This fact lent considerable authority to his pronouncements on the future of Irish composition.

His remarks to Cousins on this subject are worth quoting at some length here, as they demonstrate that, like Patterson and Hughes, he was anxious to resist narrow and limiting views concerning the sorts of compositions that could be considered authentically 'Irish'. Esposito asked Cousins if he could supply the answer to a question he had often asked, but 'without getting much satisfaction':

> [JC] I acknowledged the compliment but, but felt grave doubts on the matter.
>
> 'What is Irish music?'
>
> [JC] Well — you see —
>
> 'Yes, yes', the Signor went on, with a laugh, and a shrug of his shoulders. 'You all commence that way, but you won't answer my question, "What is Irish music?" Is Brian Boru's March Irish music?'
>
> [JC] It is of course.
>
> 'Well, give me the composer's score, and I'll play it. But you can't. You can only give me a melody sixteen bars long; no harmony; no expression. If I give it to sixty performers to play once through, and all playing the same note — well.'
>
> [JC] I quite appreciated his gesture of pain; but suggested that the March might be used as a theme and be treated as Liszt treated the Hungarian melodies.
>
> 'Oh, but', he exclaimed, 'where is your Irish music then?'
>
> 'I assume', I said, evading the question, 'that you have little sympathy with the advocates of an Irish School of Music.'

> 'On the contrary', he replied warmly, 'I have every sympathy, but I think there is too much loose thinking on the subject. Some people want us to play or sing nothing but old airs. Others want us to harmonise according to ancient modes. We hear of certain pieces not being "Irish," and we hear it said "That's Irish," because something in a song makes one remember some other air which is regarded as Irish. But there is no standard, why shouldn't modern music be as much Irish as single, primitive melodies?'

Cousins asked if Esposito thought that Irish composers would be better advised not to base their work on folk music:

> 'No, certainly not', he [Esposito] said, with emphasis. 'I would use up the vast store of thematic material in the melodies.'
>
> [JC] 'According to modern methods?'
>
> 'Of course! Music is a universal voice. Every development in the art belongs to the whole world. If your Irish composers use every modern device of the orchestra their music will be none the less Irish.'

'The music that the future will call Irish,' he continued, 'will be written by Irishmen, and will be Irish by virtue of something of his race-consciousness which his music will set free — no matter what his creed or political opinions may be.' Clearly, Esposito considered the view that all Irish composers should use folk music in a very obvious way as the basis for their work to be deeply misguided. The intrinsic quality of musical works had nothing to do with whether they were based on folk music or not, as it was also possible for composers to use this material in ways that were merely naïve and crude. Young Irish composers, Esposito argued, should concentrate first and foremost on acquiring a competent compositional technique — only then would they be in a position to make effective use of the expressive possibilities that folk music provided. As he put the matter succinctly, '[m]y advice to Irish composers is to master their art as musicians to the fullest possible extent; then, go back to the wonderful store of folk-melodies and build them into their music.'[70]

Esposito's personal interest in Irish folk music grew considerably during the 1890s and he started to experiment with arranging it — a development that aroused the keen interest of the *Freeman's Journal*, which devoted an entire column to the discussion of his first published arrangements when they came out in 1897.[71] The *Two Irish Melodies* for piano,

70 'Irish Music: A Chance for Irish Composers', *Irish Independent*, 19 February 1906
71 'Five Irish Melodies', *Freeman's Journal*, 11 December 1897

Op. 39, were versions of 'Avenging and bright' and 'Though the last glimpse of Erin' ('The Coulin'), respectively. These were clearly intended for pianists with a modest technique and the second of them was set for the RIAM grade examinations. They were followed by *Three Irish Melodies*, Op. 40, for voice and piano, for which George Sigerson had written the words and which were dedicated to Alfred Percival Graves. The first song 'Hush! O hush!' is a simple lullaby in which the flattened seventh features predominantly.[72] Esposito places particular emphasis on this modal inflexion and heightens the exotic aspect of the folksong in the elaborate piano accompaniment. The second song 'The Heather Glen' is based on the air *An Smactaoin crón [sic]*[73] and the third, 'Movourneen Mine', employs a melody from the Bunting Collection entitled 'The Wheelwright'. A further set of *Irish Melodies* for voice and piano was published as Op. 41, which includes a deft arrangement of 'The Lark in the Clear Air'.

Significantly, his next major composition — the first large-scale work he had completed for over fifteen years — was based on Irish subject matter. This was a large-scale cantata for soloists, choir and orchestra entitled *Deirdre*, Op. 38, which he submitted for the 1897 Feis Ceoil composer's competition under the pseudonym 'Allegro Assai'. On the face if it, Esposito's decision to enter this competition seems rather surprising: he was, after all, a highly experienced professional musician in his early forties who had already written and published a considerable quantity of music, rather than a student composer at the start of his career. There are, however, several reasons which may explain this circumstance. First of all, it appears that although the performance competitions of the Feis were expected to attract mostly student entrants, the composers' competitions were not envisaged as taking place on this level. Secondly, Esposito may have felt under some obligation to participate in order to ensure that the competition would feature at least one entry of a decent standard, particularly in its inaugural year — the number of potential participants, one suspects, cannot have been high. Finally, there was the prospect of a public performance for the winning piece — a comparatively rare opportunity which may have been an added incentive. Unsurprisingly, *Deirdre* was duly awarded the Cantata Prize by Ebenezer Prout, the distinguished music theorist and composer, who adjudicated on this occasion.

The text for the cantata was the handiwork of Thomas William Rolleston (1857–1920), a translator and a minor poet who was involved at various times with both the Gaelic League and the Irish Literary Society and who is principally remembered today for his *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race* (1911). Rolleston's libretto is based on the tale of Deirdre (Derdriu), which is thought to date from the eighth or early ninth century and was preserved in one

72 Apart from being described as 'A Southern Lullaby', no source or title is given for the folk tune.

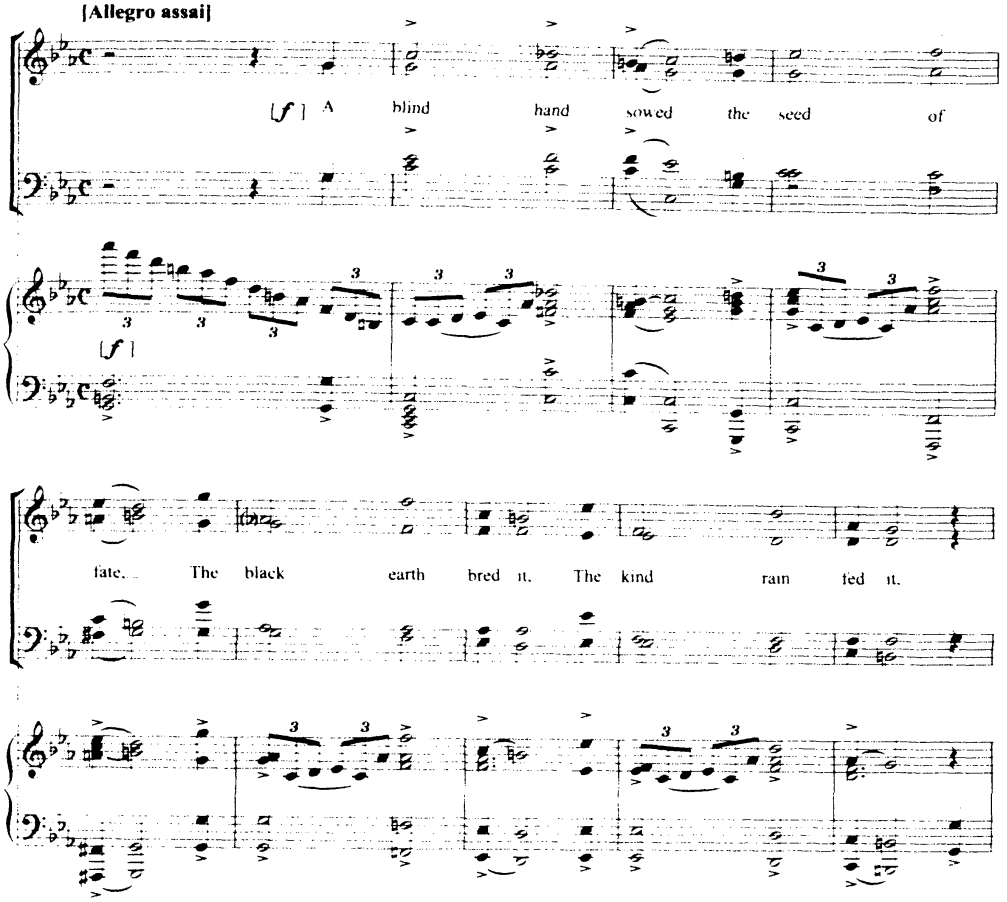
73 'An smachdín [or smaichtín] crón', *The Complete Petrie Collection of Ancient Irish Music*, III, Charles Villiers Stanford, ed. (London, 1905), tune no. 1582. The Irish title literally means 'a small brown mallet or baton', but, according to P. Dineen (*Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla, an Irish-English Dictionary* (Dublin, 1927), 1063), the phrase *smaichtín crón* refers to 'a kind of tobacco formerly smuggled into Ireland, and hence the name of a popular air'.

of the great Gaelic manuscript collections, the twelfth-century *Book of Leinster*. The action opens at the court of Conchobor (in modern Irish, Conor) mac Nessa, the king of the powerful Ulaid people who gave their name to the province of Ulster. During a drunken revel, the wife of one of Conchobor's bards, Fedlimid, gives birth to a baby daughter. A druid names her Deirdre and prophesies that she will cause great destruction. Some of the assembled company call for the child to be killed, but Conchobor decrees that she be brought up in secret until such time as he can marry her. Years later, the girl sees a raven drinking the blood of a slaughtered calf in the snow, whereupon she declares that the man she desires should have black hair, ruddy cheeks and a white body. When her nurse tells her that Noisi is such a man, she sets out to accost him, wishing to make him her lover. He reminds her of the prophecy but she mocks him for his cowardice, and by recourse to supernatural means, compels him to elope with her. Together with Noisi's brothers, they flee throughout the country, hoping to evade Conchobor's vengeance. His implacable enmity eventually compels them to seek refuge in Scotland, but the king there lusts after Deirdre and they leave for an island in the sea. Conchobor devises a ruse to lure them back to Ireland: he asks Fergus mac Roich to go as an emissary to Scotland and a token of safe-keeping, a task that Fergus accepts in good faith. The exiles agree to return, but are slaughtered on arrival — with the exception of Deirdre, who is forced to live in joyless subjection to Conchobor. When he plans to give her to Eogan mac Durthacht, an accomplice in his treachery, she commits suicide by dashing her head against a rock.

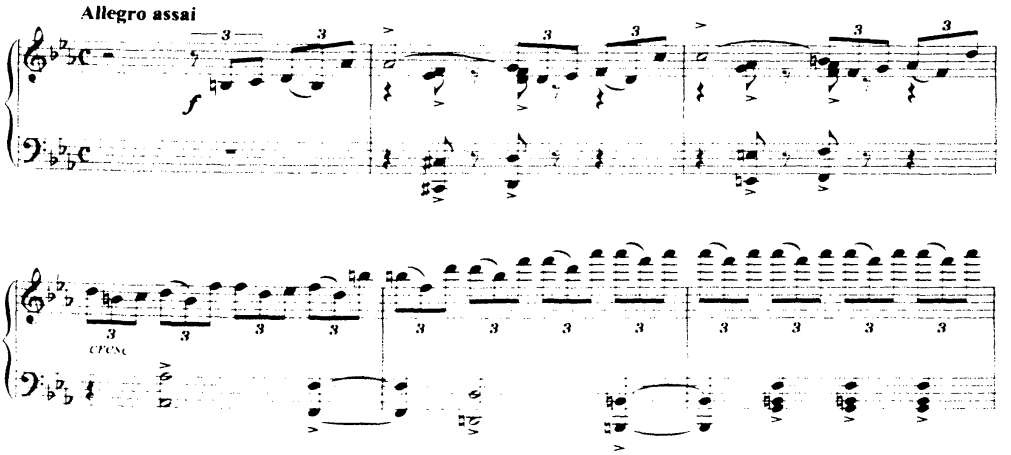
A version of this grim tale of treachery, betrayal and cruelty had been published as early as 1808 by Theophilus O'Flanagan, and further translations and adaptations continued to appear later in the century, some of them by distinguished literary figures such as Samuel Ferguson, Standish O'Grady and George Sigerson. Douglas Hyde published an English verse translation in 1895 (in his collection *The Three Sorrows of Story-telling and Ballades of St Columkille*) which proved very influential and subsequently inspired other contemporary Irish writers to produce treatments of their own, including Lady Gregory, AE (George Russell), Yeats, Synge and James Stephens. Rolleston's version, which appears to have been written specially for Esposito,[74] presents a highly compressed retelling of the original and differs in a few minor, but interesting details. In this version, for example, Deirdre first encounters Naisi [sic] after he has been injured by a wild boar. She falls in love with him while tending his wounds — an episode that clearly recalls Wagner's *Tristan* (Rolleston was himself an ardent Wagnerian). Although the poem is undistinguished in terms of its literary quality, it is nonetheless well suited to musical setting, as it dispenses with as much of the narrative as possible in order to focus on the emotional responses of the principal protagonists, Deirdre, Naisi and Fergus.

74 Rolleston's poem was published separately in 1897 by Patrick Geddes of Edinburgh and is described in this edition as being written for a cantata entered for Feis Ceoil.

Ex. 21: Deirdre, Op. 38, opening chorus



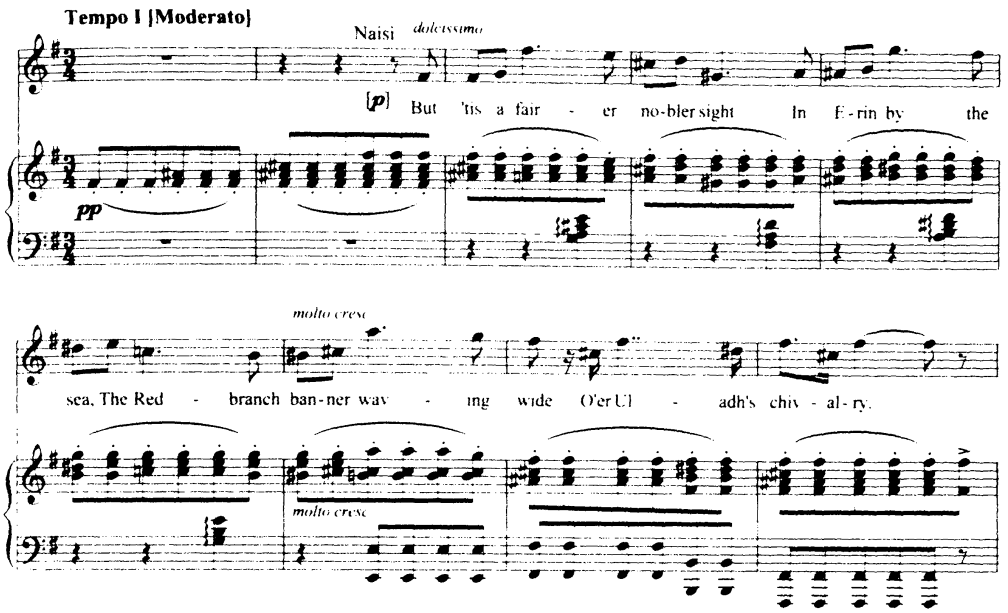
Ex. 22: Deirdre, Op. 38, opening chorus, closing section



Rolleston's libretto falls into three sections. The first depicts Deirdre's initial encounter with Naisi and King Conor's realization that he has been betrayed; the second the sojourn of the lovers on the Scottish island and the arrival of Fergus; and the third Deirdre's despair at the slaying of Naisi. This tripartite organization is reflected in Esposito's musical embodiment. Part I is dominated by the chorus whose primary material in C minor ('A blind hand sowed the seed') acts as a form of rondo theme (Ex. 21), supported by secondary material in A flat ('Deep in the trackless forest). These two thematic ideas are well contrasted and convey that essential sense of impending tragedy on the one hand, and the tender femininity of Deirdre on the other. Within the subsidiary paragraph in A flat, a further contrast is created by the brief entrance of the solo soprano, whose music powerfully evokes Deirdre's solitary longing and pain, shifting semitonally from A flat to the remote region of A major. Her climactic high A is skilfully placed to underpin the emotional climax of the passage (at the words 'Her young heart throbbed with longing') and when the soprano is joined by the choir (re-establishing A flat), the rich five-part vocal texture underlines Deirdre's haunting beauty and a sense of her vulnerability. This last is further accentuated by a menacing return of the chorus with stern, hymn-like music in C minor, accompanied by a new idea in the orchestra which is distinctly reminiscent of material from the first movement of Liszt's *Faust Symphony* in its impetuous rhythmic drive (Ex. 22). This leads to a new episode which introduces Naisi in the context of a hunting scene employing the standard Romantic accoutrements of a male-voice choir and horn calls. His ensuing love duet with Deirdre is dramatically interrupted by a solo bass, whose stern recitative relates King Conor's vengeful resolve and imparts a mood of foreboding to the ensuing reprise of the earlier choral hymn, which brings Part I to a close.

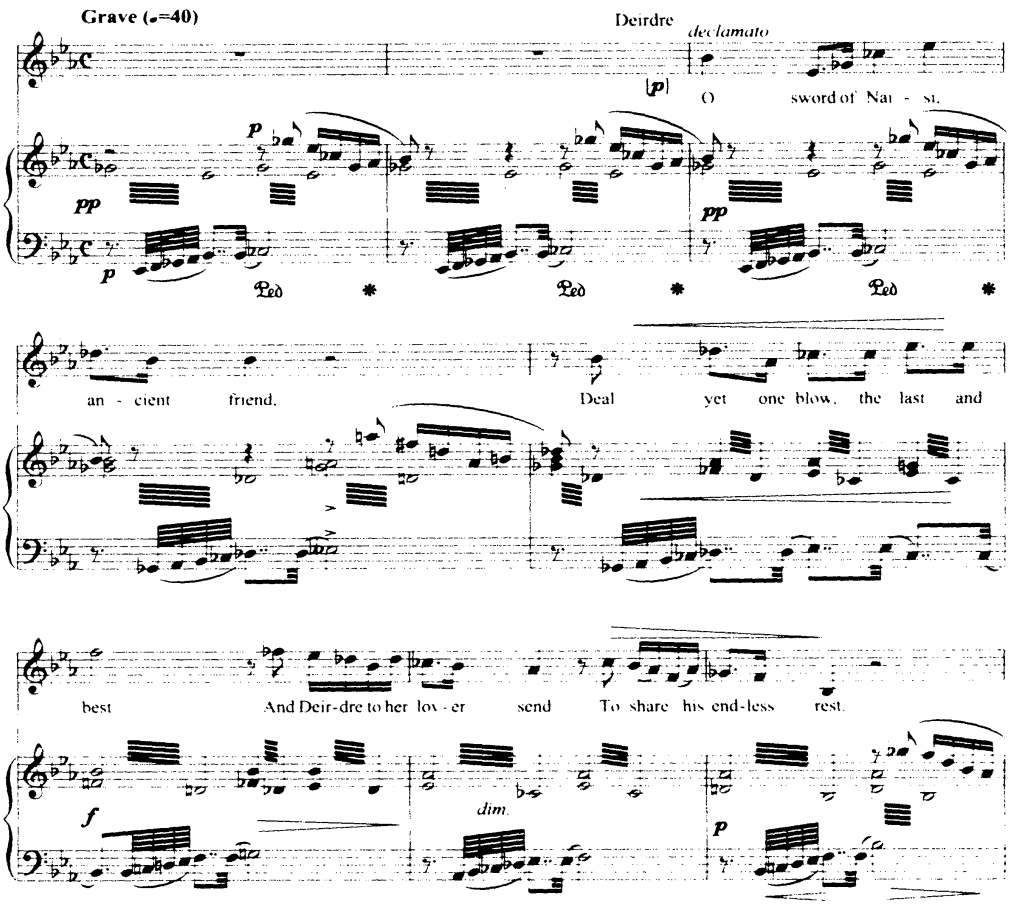
Part II opens with a depiction of Deirdre and Naisi's pastoral idyll on their lonely island off the coast of Scotland. Deirdre's tranquil pentatonic musings provide an effective foil to the more anguished music given to Naisi, who is tortured by his betrayal of King Conor (Ex. 23). This material comes to dominate their ensuing love duet and signals the arrival of Fergus, whose ominous calls are heard from afar. Fergus' overtly operatic monologue ('O noble heart') dominates the next section, in which he outlines Conor's proposal for a peaceful solution to the conflict. Ironically, this is predominantly cast in a seemingly innocent C major, which is undermined by Deirdre's fearful interjection in C minor and the orchestral leitmotiv heard previously (Ex. 22). The closing scene, depicting Naisi's naïve trust in Conor's sincerity and Fergus's assurances, is shot through with foreboding and concludes with a poignant aria for Deirdre ('Farewell! O serene glen!') in which she meditates on her uncertain future.

Ex. 23: *Deirdre*, Op. 38, Part II, opening duet



Part III of *Deirdre* opens with an evocation of sunrise on the morning of the lover's return to Ireland. This music unfolds over an extended C pedal lasting thirty-five bars. The chorus gives a brief premonition of the forthcoming battle by the 'last of the clan of Usna' in A minor before the solo tenor sings a lament, centred around A flat minor, over the impending demise of Naisi. The semitonal shift from A flat to A minor, which mirrors a similar move shortly after the opening of Part I, lends vividness to the evocation of the ensuing battle scene that is much more vivid, though the section is perhaps too short to have sufficient impact. As the music subsides in intensity, a reminiscence of Deirdre's closing aria in Part II is introduced to telling effect, though the subsequent evocation of Conor gazing at Deirdre as she kneels among the dead is dramatically less effective. This is rescued by what is arguably the finest music in the cantata, a dirge in E flat minor, which may owe something to the final pages of *La Traviata* (Ex. 24). The influence of Verdi is also manifest in the two powerful climaxes of the coda in which Naisi's angular theme of torment is gradually transformed to suggest a mood of longing and resignation. The last scene evoking Deirdre's longing for death, on the other hand, inevitably brings to mind the close of *Tristan*, and, after the final reprise of the opening chorus, it culminates in a similarly radiant mood.

Ex. 24: *Deirdre*, Op. 38, Part III, Deirdre's aria 'O sword of Naisi'



The composition of *Deirdre* was undoubtedly an event of great importance in the history of Irish music up to this point, and was especially significant in that it reflected the preoccupation of Irish writers at this period with Gaelic mythology. It is interesting to note, however, that in responding musically to the Deirdre legend Esposito made no attempt to employ Irish folk music or stylized evocations of it: the musical language of the work derives exclusively from mainstream European Romanticism. One wonders whether this reflected Esposito's personal conviction that Irish composers should look first to Austro-German, French and Italian models rather than occupying themselves with folk music. If so, such a position would be completely consonant with his insistence that the Feis Ceoil should foster European art music as well as Irish traditional music. Although *Deirdre* is by no means a technically flawless work, it is not unreasonable to suggest that it set new standards of technical excellence and professionalism for younger Irish composers and

provided a practical demonstration of the kind of large-scale work it was possible to write on an Irish subject.

From the point of view of Esposito's own personal development as a composer, *Deirdre* also represented a considerable advance on his previous work. In it, he demonstrated for the first time an assured handling of a post-Wagnerian harmonic language which is considerably more complex than that of his earlier scores. The cantata was Esposito's most ambitious work to date and evinces an impressive control of large-scale formal organization. It also reveals a fine instinct for dramatic pacing and a talent for musical characterization — qualities that later stood him in good stead when writing his operas. The rondo design of Part I, which features recurrences of an oppressive C minor, engenders an atmosphere of ineluctable tragedy, while juxtapositions of diatonic tranquillity and chromatic menace in Parts II and III generate remarkable dramatic tension. The vocal writing is also excellently judged throughout: Esposito shows a truly Italianate understanding of vocal gestural resources, even if his setting of Rolleston's English contains occasional misaccentuations. Perhaps the most impressive feature of *Deirdre*, however, is Esposito's ability to depict characters of considerable psychological complexity: Deirdre and Naisi, like Tristan and Isolde, are anti-heroes who are treated with great sympathy and subtlety. Esposito's portrayal lends them a rich suggestiveness which anticipates the later retellings of the legend by Yeats and Synge.

The premiere of *Deirdre* took place on 20 May 1897, the third day of the Feis Ceoil, as part of a concert that also included the third movement of Stanford's *Irish* Symphony and his *Cavalier Songs* as well as the overture to Wallace's *Lurline* (the latter items were conducted by the prominent Dublin choral conductor Joseph Smith). The organization of this concert clearly required a special effort on the part of the Feis Committee, who not only had to engage soloists and secure the services of a suitable choir, but also assemble an orchestra for the occasion. Esposito conducted the premiere himself and rehearsed the forces beforehand. The role of Deirdre was sung by Marie Duma and those of Naisi and Fergus by Ivor McKay and William Ludwig, respectively.[75] The work was very warmly received: Rolleston was called forward for special plaudits and Esposito was highly gratified to be awarded a trophy in the form of a gold harp. 'I shall never forget', he wrote to the committee afterwards, 'how generously the Irish people have treated me, and I shall always strive to be worthy of their encouragement.'[76] The premiere of *Deirdre* did much to establish Esposito's reputation as a composer in Dublin. In his recitals since 1882 he had played relatively few of his own works, with the result that Irish audiences thought of him almost exclusively as a performer. As the critic of *Freeman's Journal* observed:

> To most people who take an interest in music, he is a distinguished pianist, indisputably eminent in that department, and approved more or less warmly

75 *Freeman's Journal*, 21 May 1897
76 *Freeman's Journal*, 25 June 1897

according to individual preferences. But good as he is as a pianist he is many times better as a composer and his cantata *Deirdre* is of his very best work.[77]

Deirdre met with a more mixed reception when it was subsequently performed in London on 26 February 1898 at the Promenade Concerts given by Henry Wood at Queen's Hall. The reviewer of the *Pall Mall Gazette* found the work to be stylistically inconsistent and lacking in inspiration, though he conceded that the performance of the Queen's Hall choir was rather lacklustre.[78] By contrast, the critic for the *Daily News* considered the performance to have been good, but was critical of Rolleston's 'sketchy' libretto and noted that Evangeline Florence, who sang the role of Deirdre, was out of voice.[79] The reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* detected some Celtic elements in the score, but was more impressed by the Italianate nature of its melodic writing.[80]

Esposito's interest in arranging Irish melodies and the composition of *Deirdre* seem to have resulted in a closer association with prominent protagonists in the Gaelic and literary revivals. In January 1898 he went to London to attend the annual conference of the ISM where, as a result of a paper given by Joseph Seymour about Feis Ceoil, he enjoyed a certain celebrity for having composed *Deirdre*.[81] The 'Irish Toy Symphony' was repeated at the closing concert of the conference.[82] While in London, Esposito was invited to an 'at home' organized by the Irish Literary Society at their rooms in 8, Adelphi Terrace on 8 January, on which occasion Edith Oldham gave a paper comparing the Eisteddfod and the Feis.[83] After the lecture, which was attended by prominent Irish literary figures such as Graves and Sigerson, Esposito played a short programme of his arrangements of Irish folk songs, Op. 40 and 41, assisted by Alex Elsner and Gordon Cleather from the RIAM.[84] This was Esposito's first close contact with the Irish Literary Society in London. Soon after his return to Ireland, he, along with A. C. Mackenzie, Grove and Prout, wrote to recommend that the society pursue a policy of collecting Irish traditional airs.[85] The National Literary Society showed a similar enthusiasm and, with the encouragement of Sigerson, hosted a lecture by Rolleston on Irish songs at which Esposito's arrangements provided a conclusion to the evening.[86] Esposito was now closely engaged with the promotion of Irish culture, and this involvement would soon bring about the composition of his first opera.

77 *Freeman's Journal*, 5 March 1897

78 *Pall Mall Gazette*, 28 February 1898. *Deirdre* was heard again at the Dublin Feis of 1903 conducted by the composer; it also received a performance with Arthur Fagge's London Choral Society at the Crystal Palace and in 1907 by the Chicago Choral Society.

79 *Daily News*, 1 March 1898

80 *Glasgow Herald*, 28 February 1898

81 'The Incorporated Society of Musicians', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 January 1898

82 On the last day of the ISM conference Esposito appeared as pianist in a performance of his First Violin Sonata.

83 *Freeman's Journal*, 2 January 1898

84 *Reynolds' Newspaper*, 9 January 1898.

85 *Freeman's Journal*, 28 January 1898

86 *Freeman's Journal*, 28 January 1898